

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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No situation is more fraught with drama, than women enjoying an afternoon cup of tea. Those who are dieting are engaged in an awesome struggle: Should they have sugar? Can they resist the hostess's seven-layer? And there is always the possibility that someone will spill hot tea in somebody's lap. The suspense on such occasions is really scarcely endurable.

LILY-WHITE TOWN

by Jack Ritchie

Mrs. PRUITT frowned. "Come now, Mildred, surely you must have at least one juvenile delinquent. Every other place does these days."

Mildred Wooller shook her head. "I'm sorry, Clara, but I just can't think of a single one. We're a very small town and everybody's off the streets by ten."

Clara Pruitt sipped her tea. "I regret to say that State Headquarters has had an eye on your club, Mildred."

"Oh, dear! Is that why they sent you all the way up here?"

Clara nodded. "In August, the Confederation of Women's Clubs sponsored Help the Needy Month. We received no report on progress made in Elmdale."

"I know," Mildred said contritely. "But we just didn't have any-

thing to report. Everybody here sort of takes care of everybody else and so nobody's needy."

Clara put down her cup. "There's been talk of revoking your club's charter, if we don't get any action from Elmdale soon."

"But headquarters always picks a subject that we don't have any of," Mildred said plaintively. "Like Help the Handicapped, or Emotionally Disturbed Month, or Unwed. . . ." She moved her hands



helplessly. "And this month it's Juvenile Delinquency, and we just don't have any of that either."

"Don't be absurd, Mildred," Clara said. "Boys will be boys, and surely you must have some of them."

"Oh, yes," Mildred said eagerly. "About half of our children are boys."

"Then think," Mrs. Pruitt said firmly. "Some of them must have gotten into trouble with the law."

"We don't have much law here, Clara. Just Mr. Barrow, our constable, and the boys all like him. The last time he arrested anybody was in the summer of '56 and that was a tourist who was litter-bugging our park."

"Almost anything can qualify as juvenile delinquency," Clara said a trifle desperately. "How about truancy?"

Mildred shook her head. "Elmdale always wins the county Best Attendance Flag. Last year we would have had a perfect record, except that Henry Preston missed an afternoon."

Mrs. Pruitt closed her eyes. "I give up. I suppose you all live to a ripe old age and die of boredom?"

"My mother is still spry at seventy-eight," Mildred said proudly. "She still bakes all her own bread and Mr. Swanson used to say that she made the best Graham bread in town."

"Used to?" Clara asked dryly. "Did he change his mind?"

"No. He fell off a cliff."

"Well," Clara said. "So some things do happen here."

"Every afternoon, rain or shine, he'd take a constitutional through the woods and along Felton's cliff. Then last year he slipped and fell over."

Clara tasted a cookie. "Maybe somebody pushed him."

"He lived alone," Mildred said. "He was almost eighty and everybody in town thought he had a lot of money hidden in the walls of his house or the basement or some place like that. But the constable searched and searched and he didn't find anything."

There was a thud on the porch outside and Mildred said, "That's the paper. Frank has the route now."

"There's a recluse in every town," Clara said. "Nine times out of ten it turns out that he has no money at all."

"Well, people didn't exactly *know* that he had money. They just figured he had because he worked hard all his life and he never seemed to spend much." Mildred poured more tea. "Frank is a nice boy, but he isn't like Henry was."

Clara seemed pensive. "On the other hand, if everybody *thought* he had money . . ."

"Henry Preston," Mildred said. "He had the paper route before Frank. Such a polite boy and a blessing to his mother. She's a widow and he'd do anything for her."

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Clara selected two lumps of sugar. "How do you know there was no money? You've just got the constable's word for that."

"Mr. Barrow says he searched for hours." Mildred stirred her tea. "Henry gave up the paper route last year. Usually when a paper boy gives up a route, he sells it to the next boy. Like a doctor's practice, you know. But Henry gave it to Frank. Henry's a generous boy."

"How do you know that Swanson fell off the cliff? Did anybody see him fall?"

"No. But the constable says that's what must have happened." Mildred put her cup on the saucer. "Henry gave up the route because he said it interfered with his school work. Though, goodness knows, he always had straight A's."

"You say that Swanson lived alone," Clara pressed. "Didn't he have any friends?"

"Just the constable. He and Mr. Swanson used to play chess once in awhile."

"Ah, ha!" Clara said thoughtfully.

"Emily, that's Henry's mother, is such a nice woman. She worked at McCoy's grocery store for eight years and never missed a day. Not a single day. But it was hard on her."

"This constable, Mr. Barrow, what kind of a man is he?"

"Very jolly," Mildred said. "He belongs to just about every club in town."

"Has he been spending any . . . ah, extremely large sums of money recently?"

"I haven't heard that he has," Mildred said. "Emily quit her job at McCoy's last year."

"He'd wait," Clara said almost to herself. "Two years, three."

"It was such luck for Emily," Mildred said. "Getting that inheritance from her uncle in Seattle." She frowned slightly. "Or was it Portland? Once Emily said Seattle and the other time Portland. I guess she must be confused."

"Who found the body?" Clara asked.

"Henry," Mildred said.

Clara's voice was a preoccupied murmur. "Naturally Barrow wouldn't want to find the body himself. Too suspicious."

"That was the afternoon Henry was absent from school and spoiled the perfect attendance record." Mildred laughed lightly. "My goodness! He was playing hookey! Imagine that, Clara. We really do have a juvenile delinquent after all, don't we? Wouldn't Henry qualify?"

But Mrs. Pruitt wasn't listening. Her thoughts were still on Constable Barrow.

